Teachers as advocates for widening participation

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Abstract
In England and Australia, higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to widen participation (WP) in higher education (HE) to enhance social justice and improve individual and national economic returns. Furthermore, HEIs are the major providers of initial and in-service teacher education. This article surveys international literature to explore ways in which teacher education programmes could and do contribute to preparing teachers to advocate for WP, including drawing on learning from WP research that demonstrates the value of current HE students engaging young people in schools and colleges to support them in seriously considering progressing to HE. We conclude that teachers and pre-service teachers are well placed to be advocates for WP. In the majority of higher education institutions, however, WP and teacher education functions are not working collaboratively to embed advocacy for WP into teacher education programmes.

Keywords: pre-service teacher education; initial teacher training; newly qualified teachers; widening participation; access; students; advocates; ambassadors.

Introduction

In both England and Australia, higher education institutions (HEIs) have obligations to widen participation to students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups, with a particular emphasis in both countries on those of lower socio-economic status (SES). This paper draws on published research to examine the role of school teachers in enacting WP and enabling young people from targeted groups to progress to and succeed in higher education (HE). It also draws on the small but rich evaluation literature from England and Australia about the impact of 'student ambassadors', or mentors, who are current HE students working with school and college students, in encouraging and enabling young people to progress to HE. Combing these sources of literature suggests an important role for teachers in WP, which could be extended if they are viewed and trained as 'advocates' for WP. In the majority of HEIs, however, WP and teacher education divisions are not working collaboratively to embed advocacy

for WP into initial or in-service teacher education programmes (see Thomas et al., 2010; Woods and Kendall, 2010).

Widening participation policy in Australia and England

While their ideologies may differ, Australian and UK governments have demonstrated a concern for social justice for groups that are under-represented in HE. They have invested in programmes aimed at improving the post-school opportunities for a range of students, including students from low income or low SES backgrounds, students residing in low-participation neighbourhoods, students
with disabilities and students from specific ethnicities. Much of this work has focused on the role of HEIs in contributing to these goals.

In Australia, there is a renewed federal government commitment to HEIs addressing social exclusion and promoting equity and social justice as espoused in the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008). This agenda is now being implemented by the Gillard Labour minority government, and the Australian government has an HE participation target that by 2020 students from low-SES backgrounds should account for 20% of all undergraduate enrolments. As well as setting quantitative targets, the Australian government's response to the Bradley Review has included significant targeted funding to universities, intended to foster a range of WP programmes to ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds aspire to and are able to participate in HE through 'a new program for outreach activities and a loading paid to institutions enrolling students from low-SES backgrounds' (Recommendation 31, Bradley et al., 2008:xxiii). This funding promotes partnerships with schools and other education providers to raise aspirations and provide academic mentoring and support.

In the same year as the Bradley Review, all Australian State, Territory and Federal Ministers of Education signed The Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008), the first goal of which was to promote equity and excellence in Australian schooling. Against this background, a number of Australian universities have established cooperative programmes to promote HE to under-represented groups of school students in their regions. While some of these programmes existed prior to the review, many have been subject to renewed emphasis, with an increase in the overall number of programmes in the post-Bradley era (Gale et al., 2010).

In England there is a long-standing commitment to greater equality in terms of who participates in higher education (e.g. the 'Robbins Report', Committee on Higher Education, 1963; and the 'Dearing Report', Dearing, 1997). The Labour government (elected in 1997) developed an active approach to WP, which was implemented by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). During this period, HEFCE used a range of approaches, which included: funding outreach projects; developing a WP premium paid to institutions to attract, recruit, teach and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds; and requiring institutions to develop and report on a WP strategy. In addition, until

July 2011, there was considerable funding and effort through the 'Aimhigher' programme.

Aimhigher was a national collaborative programme that aimed to widen participation by raising awareness, aspirations and attainment among young people from under-represented groups (particularly low-SES and disabled students). It was organised into local partnerships (HEFCE, 2004) that were designed to remove competition between HEIs, as the overarching focus was not recruitment to a specific institution, but the promotion of HE more generally. Aimhigher included some universal elements, such as summer schools (residential HE experiences, often with a subject focus) and mentoring of school/college students by HE students (called Aimhigher Associates). Other activity developed locally, although a range of common approaches evolved that tended to be linked together through the Learner Progression Framework. This approach offered targeted students a planned, integrated, sequential and progressive programme of activities and support over a period of years, particularly at key decision-making and transition points, to assist them on their journey towards HE (Action on Access, 2008).

Aimhigher funding ended in July 2011, and consequently HEIs are now expected to play a fuller role in WP. The introduction of higher tuition fees in England (up to £9000 per annum) has been accompanied by more stringent requirements on HEIs to invest a proportion of their increased fee income on interventions and bursaries to improve the access and success of students from under-represented groups (OFFA, 2011).

While government WP policies and initiatives have, in general, been welcomed by equity practitioners, the individualism and deficit assumptions frequently inherent in such programmes have been contested in Australia by Sellar and Gale (2011), in the UK by Baxter, Tate and Hatt (2007) and in Africa by Morley and Lugg (2009). These authors suggest that some programmes designed to raise aspiration for HE among under-represented groups devalue non-normative aspirations, subordinating them to middle-class norms and the demands of the countries' economies. One criticism levelled at these programmes is the implication that targeted students lack the normatively determined requirements of awareness, ambition, knowledge, etc., necessary to envision a future that includes higher education in its trajectory. Further, Sellar and Gale (2011) caution that current strategies of raising aspiration may presume that 'current forms of HE constitute a universal good' (117):

> Aspiration raising strategies tend to focus on instilling desire for a particular end, rather than engaging more strongly with the situation of different groups and with questions of what matters for them. (Sellar and Gale, 2011:117)

There are, though, strong reasons for advocating HE as 'research demonstrates that getting a university degree brings increased income, but also better health and wellbeing and greater civic participation' (Walker, 2008:268, in Abbott-Chapman, 2011).

While arguing for a reshaping of student equity programmes in HE, Sellar and Gale suggest a need for 'resourcing students to imagine alternative futures in open-ended ways' (2011:130, emphasis in original). It is in this capacity that teachers and pre-service teachers operating as WP advocates in schools can play a key role, both as resources opening up social networks and by providing relevant information, and as agents of a 'pedagogy of difference'.

Theoretical approach to WP

There is debate among WP researchers about the causes of lower rates of participation among some groups compared to others (Kettley, 2007). In light of this debate, we set out our conceptual position that informs this paper. We share a general acceptance of Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theories of cultural capital and habitus as explanations of educational disadvantage and, therefore, of much inequity in educational outcomes. This structural approach to inequality sees many of the problems as embedded into the structures and systems of society in general, and education in particular. This can be contrasted with approaches that place greater emphasis on individual responsibility and agency, thus tending towards individualising the problem, locating it within individual students as part of a wider discourse of deficit and failure.

'Cultural capital', a major concept in Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of social reproduction, incorporates ways of speaking, behaving and interacting, which are learned through interactions with family and social institutions such as home and schools (McLaren, 1989; Meadmore, 1999), and it is, therefore, class-related. 'Habitus' is the disposition to act in certain ways determined by cultural capital and is the embodiment of cultural capital. This concept has been applied to institutions such as schools by Reay, David and Ball (2001). In this model, schools have an identifiable habitus that incorporates practices that mutually shape and reshape the institutions with their students, their communities and the wider socioeconomic cultures of their catchment areas (2001:para 1.3). Schools in Australia and the UK, in the main, display a middle-class habitus regardless of their geographical and cultural location.

Working-class and other under-represented students are marginalised through conflicting habitus and school expectations of cultural capital. When the middle class enter the educational field possessing a set of dispositions that are deemed the 'norm', this enables acclimatisation to the school system like 'a fish to water' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992:121). In such systems, teachers are perceived as having legitimate knowledge that they can pass onto students who, in many cases, do not have the 'right' knowledge, possessing, for example, vernacular literacies rather than those of the dominant institution. This legitimacy is strongly linked to what and whose knowledge is important and, therefore, to symbolic power. Steedman (1988) shows how children are labelled as early as primary school, as, for example, 'intelligent', 'slow' and 'average'. Thus, as Mills (2008b) points out, teachers may play a role in maintaining inequality, as they may not see and 'often do not intend the social sorting that schooling imparts on students' (262), heedless of how 'the hidden linkages between scholastic

aptitude and cultural heritage point to the role that schools and school systems play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities' (261).

Methodology

The primary method of research used to inform this paper is a literature review designed to explore three central questions:

1. In what ways can teachers and pre-service teachers be advocates for WP?
2. How does teacher education and training prepare them to be advocates for WP?
3. How could pre-service teacher education be enhanced to enable more teachers and pre-service teachers to be better advocates for WP?

The literature review was carried out systematically through a variety of databases including ProQuest and EbscoHost. Search terms were identified and expanded as necessary. In addition, grey literature emanating from the Aimhigher programme in England was searched and reviewed. As well as literature that was identified through these initial searches, we followed up other terms suggested by the search results. Over 60 items were selected, the majority of which were peer reviewed.

The major focus of the search was for relevant literature from the UK and Australia; however, this was supplemented by material from other countries, particularly the USA. This follows the advice of the late champion of WP, Maggie Woodrow (1999), who stated that much could be learned from the USA in relation to overcoming reticence to the promotion of higher education access for under-represented groups. European literature was reviewed too, but little was found to contribute to this debate. Here the 'labelling' and 'sorting' process takes place earlier at secondary level (Crul et al., 2009), thus relocating the problem to the primary rather than the secondary and post-secondary sectors.

While efforts were made to be impartial, the philosophical biases of the researchers are probably detectable in the choice of search terms and the construction of the discussion. We, therefore, make known our position by outlining the theoretical context above.

Definitions of advocacy

The literature mostly takes for granted an understanding of the term 'advocacy', employing it to include a variety of meanings that can incorporate action on behalf of a client or client group, intervention on their behalf with community or government agencies, and promoting the interests of the client. Liebovich and Adler, for example, specify four meanings of the term: '(1) finding resources for special needs children, (2) empowering families and children, (3) changing negative public attitudes about early childhood education, and (4) promoting professionalism in the field of early childhood education' (2009:27).

For the purposes of this article, we take the Oxford Dictionary's broad definition, 'public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy' combined with the Wiktionary definition, 'the practice of supporting someone to make their voice heard' and Leibovich and Adler's third definition, 'changing negative public attitudes'.

Our meaning can be summarised as:

> To publicly and professionally support the cause of WP in HE with the aims of changing negative attitudes towards under-represented groups; creating opportunities for the voices of under-represented groups to be heard; and empowering students from under-represented and diverse groups to imagine and pursue HE as a viable option.

Findings

Based on this extensive and wide-ranging literature review we have brought together and synthesised research evidence in relation to the three questions listed above.

In what ways can teachers and pre-service teachers be advocates for WP? The role of school and college teachers in promoting HE

The Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) included a commitment to 'encourage parents, carers, families, the broader community and young people themselves to hold high expectations for their educational outcomes' (7, emphasis added) as a step towards promoting equity and excellence in Australian schooling. The key role of school principals was acknowledged as critical in 'promoting a culture of high expectations in schools' (11).

The UK government's educational oversight arm, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED), recognised that low expectations lead to low academic outcomes (1996) and that high expectations are a feature of the most successful education providers (OFSTED, 2011). There have been a number of school-based initiatives to improve attainment in schools (particularly with regard to school-leaving or level 2/GCSE qualifications). Efforts to improve the aspirations towards higher education, however, have been largely addressed through the Aimhigher programme, which focuses primarily on young people themselves rather than their teachers.

A study by Rubie-Davies, Hattie and Hamilton (2006) 'aimed to explore differences in teachers' expectations and judgments of student reading performance for Maori, Pacific Island, Asian and New Zealand European students' (429). The authors cite 'clear evidence that expectations do exist in regular classroom situations and that they can positively and/or negatively influence student performance and achievement' (430). Acknowledging this situation, the requirement of teachers to exhibit high expectations of all children

in their classrooms was a key policy of a newly appointed Aboriginal principal, Chris Sarra (2007), in turning around the underachievement of students at a primary school serving a Queensland Aboriginal community. Following his appointment as principal, Sarra challenged the mindset of many teachers at the school that previously had accepted Aboriginal underachievement as normal. As the children themselves began to absorb the new, positive conviction demonstrated by their teachers, academic and social standards improved dramatically.

In the context of a further education college in the UK, John Preston (2003) found that teaching staff had class-determined expectations of their students. Staff directed students to academic or vocational level 3 (pre-entry) qualifications and higher education programmes and institutions on the basis of class rather than ability or aspirations.

The implications of these reports for positioning teachers as advocates for WP include the potential for unexamined prejudices to influence their expectations of and interactions with young people from different classes and cultures. In the Australian context Allard and Santoro (2006) claim that:

> [L]ike those already in the profession, the majority of teacher education students at many Australian universities have attended middle class, Anglo-Australian schools for their primary and secondary education. This means that opportunities to engage with others from different cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds are fairly restricted. (116)

In the UK, the representativeness of the education labour force in relation to the wider community and, in particular, to the school pupil community has been highlighted as a concern by Menter et al. (2006). They draw attention, for example, to a lack of teachers from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. In the USA nearly 90% of teachers are white while approximately 40% of school children are from minority cultures (Bartolomé, 2004). This lack of interaction with diversity may perpetuate and reinforce inequality in the classroom. For example, Ford and Quinn (2010) discuss the fear of 'others' experienced by some white teachers when they initially enter multicultural classrooms, and the difficulty of shedding ingrained values that help them to position themselves simultaneously as both 'colour-blind' and superior. Furthermore, Basit and Santoro (2011) found that early career and mid-career minority ethnic teachers in Britain and Australia can be positioned as a 'cultural expert'. This notion stems from expectations that they will be mentors and role models (advocates) for ethnic minority students together with being curriculum and pedagogy leaders within schools.

It is important that efforts are made to ensure that the education workforce reflects the diversity of society. The UK Training & Development Agency (2009) memorandum to the British Parliament notes:

> Around £1 million was allocated to [Initial Teacher Training] providers to support the recruitment and retention of BME [black and minority ethnic]

> trainees, whereby all providers of teacher training are set an advisory target and funding is paid to providers where there have been year-on-year improvements in recruitment. In order to improve retention, funding is also paid for each BME trainee on programmes.

Advocacy for WP requires more than employing teachers who reflect the communities they serve and extends beyond ethnicity. A more systematic approach is needed where WP is built into trainee teachers' curriculum and experience, to ensure all trainee teachers, teachers and mentors are advocates for WP and that it is not done in accordance with expectations based on the ethnicity of the teacher and notions of 'cultural expert'. Such an approach is reductionist and detrimental on two counts: it assumes that all non-white ethnicities are the same, and it risks ignoring the other strengths and expertise that these teachers bring to the school or college.

How does teacher education and training prepare them to be advocates for WP? The role of teacher education and training programmes

The widening participation debate and the need to strengthen the social capital of students from under-represented groups highlight the need for teachers to 'inform, encourage and facilitate learners' and for professional development for teachers 'to help them become more aware of, and sensitive to, cultural and social diversity' (Abbott-Chapman, 2011:63). Mills (2008b:261), in a review of literature on the ways in which pre-service teacher education programmes prepare teachers for dealing with student diversity, states that teacher education tends to deal with diversity in a superficial and fragmentary way. Indeed, Goodwin (1997, in Mills 2008b:268) argues that 'the typical response of teacher education programs to the growing diversity among students has been to add a course or two on multicultural education but to leave the rest of the curriculum largely intact'. Our review of the international literature identifies a number of dispositions and capacities that teacher education programmes need to develop in their students to enable them to be advocates of diversity – and we would argue, more specifically, WP. These need to be integral to teacher education programmes, and not marginalised into a single module.

Teacher identity

Allard and Santoro (2006) state that teacher education programmes too often focus on how student teachers' discourses and understandings of difference shape learner identities, but rarely discuss how these also shape teachers' identities. This leads to a perspective of difference as a deficit rather than an asset. Such views need to be disrupted prior to implementing any WP programme that includes advocates from backgrounds that contrast with those of the target groups.

Empathy and challenge

Lingard (2007) discusses an Australian survey that found that teachers 'had no professional development in respect of difference and really did not know what

to do' in current multicultural classrooms (259), suggesting a weakness in current teacher education practice regarding teaching for difference and diversity. Similarly, Moran (2008) found that in Northern Ireland current teacher education programmes prepare 'middle-class student-teachers to work in a relatively selective school system' (68), rather than more diverse schools.

One US researcher, Nieto (2006), found that teachers who were the most effective in making a positive difference to educational outcomes are generally strong communicators who demonstrate 'solidarity with, and empathy for, their students' and have 'the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge' (461). These characteristics pose challenges for teacher educators as well as their students to create curriculum and learning environments in which empathy with diverse students can be stimulated together with the courage to advocate for under-represented groups when on pre-service placements or newly appointed to a school.

Valuing diversity and difference

Students' backgrounds and experiences can have an impact on their learning. Teachers can use diversity positively to enhance the learning experience of individuals and the group, rather than seeking to normalise and elide difference. Teachers' awareness and sensitivity to the issues that learners bring into the classroom and the development of strategies for dealing with them effectively are important if the barriers are to be addressed (Barton et al., 2007:137). New Literacy Studies (NLS) offers a socially situated model that challenges dominant models of literacy, for example, replacing the economy-driven model associated with workforce training, productivity and the notion of human capital (institutional literacies) to a socio-cultural model that includes vernacular literacies. It recognises that literacy practices are formed in a number of contexts and domains, for example the private domain of home and the public domain of schooling. Drawing on NLS is a means to understand learning as a social activity, and that the role of the teacher should include ensuring that the curriculum design recognises the socially situated literacies the learners bring to the classroom.

Critical reflection

Mills (2008a) contends that teachers are able to act as 'agents of transformation rather than reproduction' and therefore 'make a difference for the most disadvantaged students' (262). Bartolomé (2004) states that pre-service teachers need to develop critical awareness of their political and ideological positioning and understanding. This should challenge beliefs that educational inequalities are 'natural', which perpetuate deficit, and develop understanding about how power functions to shape inequality in classrooms and education systems. Teacher educators should equip their students to have courage in their 'commitment to defend subordinated student populations – even when it is easier not to take a stand' (Bartolomé, 2004:120) through developing a critical pedagogy. Mills (2008a) states that, while strategies to challenge pre-service teachers' understandings and empathy are important, critical reflection

following such activity is essential, especially in challenging and influencing long-held beliefs and attitudes, and ultimately changes practice.

Advocacy and dealing with conflict

Regardless of the strength of teaching education programmes in addressing difference, and the conviction of new teachers in advocating for equitable tertiary access, conflicts may arise between the new teachers and their schools and/or colleagues (Athanases and de Oliveira, 2007). Liggett and Finley (2009) maintain 'that the teacher candidates' concern about engaging in practices that "would rock the boat" within their school context was due to a disconnect between understanding the possibilities of enacting positive change on an individual level versus the daunting undertaking of striving to change school culture or educational institutions as new teachers' (33). Athanases and de Oliveira found that such teachers were often able to influence the allocation of resources, garner support and alter attitudes and school practices, but this 'required persistence and sometimes confrontation with colleagues and administrators' (124). They suggest that training for advocacy requires conflict resolution training to assist in overcoming feelings of powerlessness as well as fear of risk, such as making enemies and losing their job.

How could pre-service teacher education be enhanced to enable more teachers and pre-service teachers to be better advocates for WP? The role of HE students as advocates for HE to school and college students

In addition to preparing education students to be better teachers in the ways outlined above, trainee teachers could also be equipped to draw upon their current and recent experience as HE students to be role models and providers of informal information, advice and guidance to the school and college students they are teaching as part of their professional placement.

The use of existing HE students as advocates for HE with school and college students is a popular approach to WP in England (Austin and Hatt, 2005:23; Wylie, 2007:18) and Australia (Koerner and Harris, 2007; Whiteley and Neil, 1998). A survey of English HEIs' WP activity found that using current HE students as advocates, ambassadors, mentors and tutors is extremely widespread, with four out of five respondent institutions using ambassadors (Pennell, West and Hind, 2005). In summary:

> HE students are ideally placed to deliver key messages as they can discuss with school students the implications of studying in HE, the demands of the course, sources of finance, the social life and the opportunities that HE can offer … they speak the truth about university in our language. Above all, the ambassadors send out the powerful message that 'people like us can go to university'. (Hatt, Baxter and Tate, 2007:296)

Institutions, however, have largely failed to take a strategic approach to partnerships with schools (Thomas et al., 2010) and do not make use of the many links that education departments have with schools and colleges. For

example, the Faculty of Education at Edge Hill University has over 4000 partnerships with schools and colleges, where trainee teachers (i.e. education students) work in educational institutions on teaching placements. These students are ideally placed to act as advocates for WP.

Evidence suggests that using HE students as advocates is an effective approach to WP (Austin and Hatt, 2005; Church and Kerrigan, 2010; Hatt, Baxter and Tate, 2007; HEFCE, 2003; Thompson, 2010). For example, Austin and Hatt (2005:25) report an increased intention to progress to university among a group of school students from 31% to 82%, and the qualitative evidence points to the significant contribution of the student ambassadors.

Although existing HE students can be used in a wide range of roles and types of WP activities (Austin and Hatt, 2005:23; Pennell, West and Hind, 2005), there appear to be two key ways in which they contribute to promoting wider access to HE:

- HE students as role models for school students
- Provision of informal information, or 'hot knowledge'

Students as role models

Many young people from lower socio-economic groups lack cultural and social capital to inform their expectations and decision-making about progressing to HE. Aimhigher activities have been most effective in transmitting an aspirational message through the enthusiasm of the 'messengers' – that is, the student ambassadors who deliver the events (Austin and Hatt, 2005; Gartland and Paczuska, 2007; Hatt, Baxter and Tate, 2007). Pre-service teachers (or education students), particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, could be explicitly equipped to act as role models for young people from lower socio-economic groups who are thinking about progressing into higher education.

A survey by Gale et al. (2010) of Australian universities' outreach showed that low socio-economic secondary school students were the dominant target group. University student 'mentors' were often participants in visits to the schools or by school students to university campuses. Mentors who had attended the same or a similar school were effective in offering academic support and, more commonly, providing information about university and acting as role models. Comments made by contributors to the survey include:

> 'By being immersed in the classroom as a co-learner or as peers, the mentors bring their own study skills, knowledge, passion and interest in their subject area to the student mentees.'

> 'Mentors are well positioned to act as positive role models and will lead by example.'

> ‘Mentors help students realise that going to university is within their reach.’
>
> ‘Peer mentors act as a role model for the students, inspiring them to raise their aspirations and achieve their potential in science and mathematics.’
>
> (Gale et al., 2010:29)

Austin and Hatt (2005:23) suggest that HE students are particularly effective as role models as they are ‘sufficiently close in age to speak the same language as the young people and yet sufficiently senior to offer a role model that the young people aspired to emulate’. Young people feel more able to talk to them and ask for the information they really need (Church and Kerrigan, 2010:8–9).

Austin and Hatt argue that ‘the message is particularly powerful because it is coming from messengers who are talking from their own lived experience’. Wylie (2007:18) argues that: ‘To achieve a successful relationship, both mentor and mentee must be from similar backgrounds in terms of ethnicity or community’, and a member of staff in the Austin and Hatt study (2005:25) makes a related comment: ‘I would claim that the very special contribution that … students can make to supporting those who may be reluctant to study and progress to HE is because the journey they have taken has not been straightforward’. Lewis and Ritchie (2010), however, did not find universally that having a mentor ‘like them’ was important, and sometimes differences were appreciated (see Gabelko and Sosniak, 2002, for a similar finding in a US context). Further, even with same-background role models, there is a risk that divisions can be emphasised, where the student ambassadors are not suitably trained for their role (Taylor, 2008).

Informal information, advice and guidance, or ‘hot knowledge’

It is widely accepted in UK and Australia that all students need better information about higher education to inform their choices of institution, discipline and course (McInnis, James and Hartley, 2000; Harvey and Drew, 2006; Krause et al., 2005; Yorke, 2000), but this is especially true for those who are the first in their family to attend higher education. Student ambassadors are ideally placed to deliver much of the information. Thompson (2010:17–24) finds significant increases in self-reported knowledge of students’ pre- and post-participation in a mentoring programme in Birmingham and Solihull in relation to:

- understanding of student life;
- information about whether to progress to HE;
- understanding of how to apply to HE;
- knowledge of qualifications required to progress to HE, including the grades required;
- knowledge of which course and subject to apply for;
- knowledge of which HEI to apply to;
- understanding of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) application process (see also Church and Kerrigan, 2010);

- knowledge about the qualifications required for specific jobs and careers.

Austin and Hatt (2005) explain how the student ambassadors were able to provide 'hot knowledge', defined by Ball and Vincent (1998) as informal sources of information that are favoured over formal sources of information as they are thought to be more trustworthy. Thus, information provided by HEIs could be viewed with suspicion, as they are representing their own interests. Conversely, the student ambassadors are perceived as more genuine and able to provide more reliable and valuable knowledge. Gartland and Paczuska (2007) find that if ambassadors can earn the trust of young people they can become sources of 'hot knowledge or information'.

The risk – which neither Austin and Hatt nor Gartand and Paczuska mention – that Ball identifies in his seminal work on the topic is that the hot knowledge or information may be partial or even incorrect. The training of ambassadors is designed to reduce the risk and points to the importance of educating pre-service teachers to provide good quality 'hot knowledge'. Gartland and Paczuska (2007) do, however, warn about the potential danger that a more formalised relationship (such as between pre-service teachers and students) might undermine their value. However, Church and Kerrigan (2010:12) found that mentors plugged a significant gap in institutional expertise with regards to progression to HE; thus, educating teachers to provide this knowledge would seem desirable.

Conclusion

The available research evidence points to the crucial role teachers in school and college play in enabling or preventing young people from under-represented and disadvantaged groups from progressing to HE. The literature about teacher education programmes identifies a range of ways in which they can contribute to preparing pre-service and new teachers as advocates for WP, although it also identifies ways in which this provision could be enhanced. In addition, the evidence about the impact of existing HE students as advocates shows that they can play a positive role in raising aspirations towards HE, and providing information that is valuable in its own right, and that is perceived to be more genuine by the young people concerned – and thus accorded greater weight.

Our literature search, however, has not identified wide recognition of the crucial role of teachers as advocates for WP nor of the role of teacher education programmes in preparing pre-service teachers not only to cater for diversity but to actively promote HE to under-represented groups as a genuine possibility. This is not to say this does not take place in some instances, but there are not examples of a systematic approach. Given that HEIs educate the teachers of tomorrow, preparing pre-service teachers to be advocates for WP is an important way that HEIs can contribute to WP and work towards bringing about sustained change.

To extend the role of teachers as advocates for WP we believe the next step is to review current teacher education programmes to assess the degree to which potential WP advocates are already prepared for the role. The authors plan to carry out this work. In the meantime, we conclude that teacher education programmes could consider embedding learning for all student teachers about:

1. the role of cultural capital and habitus in relation to progression to higher education;

2. the unique position student-teachers occupy, straddling the two worlds of schools and higher education, and how they could become a source of social capital or hot knowledge for students in schools and colleges without access to information and understanding about higher education;

3. recognising and valuing learners' histories and biographies within the learning environment, to make diversity and difference a positive contribution to learning, rather than a challenge to be overcome;

4. critical reflection to support the development of advocates' imaginative capacities, enabling them to see issues of HE from the perspective of the target population (Athanases and de Oliveira, 2007);

5. taking risks and confronting deficit views among colleagues in the school environment;

6. active engagement by pre-service and existing teachers to be generators of knowledge and practice through action research to enable them to be advocates for WP, rather than recipients of a pre-determined education programme.

The need to address WP in both Australia and the UK is ongoing and creative ways of taking the WP message to potential students have to be explored. Training for frontline teaching staff who are or will be in a position of influence to become advocates in their schools is one possible mechanism to help increase academic awareness, create a fairer system of education and close the HE participation gap. We are using our current and scheduled research to try to develop a more strategic (Thomas et al., 2010) systemic (Woods and Kendall, 2010) and praxis-based (Duckworth et al., 2010, 2011) approach to WP and partnership working with schools and colleges through teacher education and training.

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